LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Wildlife Roadstrike in Victoria

Geelong – Wednesday 20 August 2025

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WITNESSES

Dr Elaine Ong, Founder, and

Nicole De Haan, Operations Manager, Vets for Compassion.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Wildlife Roadstrike in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I also welcome any other members of the public watching via the live broadcast.

To kick off, we will just have committee members introduce themselves to you, and we will start with Mr McIntosh on the screen.

Tom McINTOSH: Tom McIntosh, Member for Eastern Victoria.

Gaelle BROAD: Hi, I am Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

The CHAIR: Georgie Purcell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Katherine COPSEY: Katherine Copsey, Member for Southern Metropolitan.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for taking the time to appear before us today. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and then transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, can you both please state your full names and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Nicole De HAAN: Nicole De Haan, and I am here for Vets for Compassion.

Elaine ONG: I am Elaine Ong. I am here for Vets for Compassion.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. We now welcome your opening comments but ask they be kept to around 15 minutes to ensure plenty of time for discussion and questions. And just for members of the public watching via the live broadcast, Vets for Compassion will be doing a presentation that has some graphic imagery, so if you would prefer not to see that I would suggest turning your view off for a few minutes. Over to you.

Visual presentation.

Nicole De HAAN: Great. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of Vets for Compassion and the thousands of animals, native and otherwise, that die or suffer needlessly on our roads each year. Road strike is one of the most common yet most invisible causes of animal death across Victoria. It is not just a wildlife problem; it is a public safety issue and an adequate emergency response issue.

Let me begin with a short stretch of road – Wellington Road, Lysterfield to Rowville. This stretch, barely a few kilometres long, is one of the deadliest for eastern grey kangaroos across Melbourne. Every single day one of our rescuers, along with a local independent rescuer, patrols this stretch of road. Every single day they find bodies. Sometimes the animals are already deceased. More often than not, though, they are still alive, lying in

pain, bones shattered, internal organs ruptured, and sometimes there is a joey beside her, still alive, clinging and crying.

In the month of July alone on Wellington Road we documented 58 kangaroos in Lysterfield, 26 just up the road in Rowville and five just up a little bit further, and in addition five wallabies, five ringtail possums and one fox. That is 100 animals killed or seriously injured on a very short stretch of road in a single suburban stretch of road in just one month. These are our figures alone. This does not take into account the other rescuers in the area. So we can confidently say that these figures would be at least double, if not triple, for a short stretch of road.

We speak today not only of Wellington Road but of every road like this across Victoria still without basic mitigation measures. But this does not only refer to native wildlife. Multiple times a week we are called to respond to incidents involving non-native wildlife such as sambar deer. There is no service in place to help and end their suffering. These animals can pose a serious safety risk, particularly in urban and suburban areas where traditionally emergency services are not equipped to manage them safely. For example, in recent months we have been called out to dart and euthanise injured sambar deer in areas such as Kew, Camberwell, Alphington and, as recently as two days ago, North Balwyn. These are 250-kilo animals. A collision with one of these could have catastrophic consequences for drivers and pedestrians alike. Police and other authorities are not trained and equipped to safely euthanise large wildlife like macropods and sambar deer, especially in densely populated areas. To properly anaesthetise and manage a deer of this size requires the use of restricted narcotics, which legally and safely must be administered under the supervision of a veterinarian. Yet there is currently no official service in place for the emergency response and management of non-native wildlife such as deer, which begs the question: if none of the authorities legally responsible for these species are trained, equipped or available to respond immediately in these situations to reduce public safety risk, how exactly does the government expect these incidents to be handled?

We do not just witness animal suffering; we see the human trauma as well – drivers pulled over on the side of the road sobbing and traumatised by what they have hit, with their windscreen shattered, vehicle written off and children in the back seat terrified. One year Dr Elaine received a call from a paramedic who needed urgent veterinary advice about a large male roo that had crashed straight through the windscreen of a car and was sitting on the driver's lap inside the car. This is not uncommon. Multiple times a week volunteers are the ones responding to these harrowing scenes. They are not just darting and euthanising wildlife with compound fractures dragging themselves from the roadside, they are also the ones consoling and counselling visibly distressed members of the public. This emotional labour means they are late to work, miss family commitments and go without sleep continuously. This is the toll of a broken system, and it is one volunteers carry silently every day.

Recently we were contacted by a property developer. His site was home to a large mob of roos. Over the years, he and his young daughter would regularly visit the land together. She loved seeing the kangaroos and would ask him about them every night. But when it came time to begin construction, the reality hit. Like many before him, he felt forced to engage commercial shooters. This time, though, something had changed. Now every night his daughter still asks about the kangaroos, and now he has to lie to her because the kangaroos are dead. The guilt will eat him alive. This story is not about road strike, but the moral question is still the same.

To our government, if you have children, you understand the way of their innocence, their school projects on wildlife and their belief that adults are doing the right thing. Can you sleep at night knowing you are not practising what you preach and that you are in a position to protect what they love but choose not to? If you hit a kangaroo driving home from the school pick-up one day, who would you call? You and your child would expect help to come, but could you look them in the eye and say, 'It's okay. Help is coming,' knowing that it might not be. The truth is that help may not come – not from lack of care but because the responders were at their paid job, exhausted from the night before helping other animals when no-one else would. Why? Because Mum and Dad decided their expertise and sacrifice were not worth paying for. Can you look your child in the eye and explain that and still feel proud? That confronting reality is faced by teams across Victoria every day. This is a real-life situation. A kangaroo hit by a car and seriously injured, the vehicle written off and airbags deployed. A shaken and traumatised member of the public is left waiting for over 4 hours sitting on the side of the road alongside the suffering animal and waiting for a volunteer to respond. Tragically, this scenario is all too common.

Vets for Compassion aims to provide a 24-hour, veterinary-led emergency response service in Melbourne, making our services highly sought after. We are one of the few specialist teams licensed to legally dart and safely relocate trapped or displaced eastern grey kangaroos in urban and peri-urban areas under a permit granted by the conservation regulator. This work is powered by a trained darting team, including both veterinarians and non-veterinary professionals who undergo rigorous training and mentoring inside the organisation. A core part of our mission is upskilling the broader rescue community free of charge. Vets for Compassion has trained many independent darters across Melbourne, as well as several of Wildlife Victoria's and other groups' responders. We share this expertise not for recognition but because collaboration leads to safer, faster and more humane outcomes for wildlife.

Vets for Compassion is not a traditional rescue group. We are a veterinary emergency service that provides onsite clinical assessment, pain relief, humane euthanasia when necessary and advanced treatment, both in field and in clinic. This capability is vital during disasters, car strikes and large animal rescues, where immediate medical intervention saves lives. Despite aiming to operate 24/7, our service is under increased pressure. Vets for Compassion is still largely run by volunteers, with many struggling to balance paid work and personal commitments. To sustain and scale our impact, a paid core team is not just desirable, it is now essential. Our model is proven and trusted, but without permanent financial support, we risk losing the very people who make this work possible.

Notably, 73 per cent of our call-outs come directly from government agencies, including Victoria Police, CFA, SES, Parks Vic, Wildlife Vic and councils, highlighting their reliance on our expertise. Victoria Police have recently engaged us to train their highway patrol unit in emergency response, including humane euthanasia – skills they currently lack but are regularly expected to perform. However, they still rely on our darters to safely tranquillise mobile animals. We have also been engaged by SES units and local councils across Melbourne for training in animal handling, behaviour and responder safety – skills not covered by their standard training. Education is part of our service, and government agencies are increasingly turning to veterinary professionals not only for emergency response but also for training and capacity building. To make it clear, the reason for outlining the role of VFC is to ensure that it is fully understood that this work is being performed on a volunteer basis.

We are just one group, but the workload is shared across a range of independent rescue groups and individuals, who are all operating collectively to fulfil a role that should be the government's responsibility. Let me give you some numbers from the past three years. As you can see from the figures on the screen, in the last year of data collection our calls increased by 80 per cent from the year before. Last year the calls increased another 40 per cent, with 3171 wildlife calls responded to. Out of these calls, we saw an 85.5 per cent increase from the first year of data collection and a 77 per cent increase from the following year for wildlife hit by a vehicle. Based on these figures, we can confirm 80 to 90 per cent of those calls were for macropods. It is important to note that the figures presented here represent wildlife cases only. They do not include a significant number of companion animals or farm animals – animal emergencies that we respond to. These numbers reflect the work of one organisation alone. They do not account for the dozens of other dedicated volunteer groups and individual rescuers across Victoria, many of whom are overwhelmed, under-resourced and carrying an impossible burden. Importantly, the 2024 numbers are under-reported, as much of our team was deployed to the Grampians bushfires for two months. Had they been active as usual, these figures would have been even higher.

This financial year alone, our volunteers have provided 8376 unpaid hours on top of their normal jobs. We are at risk of losing responders – not due to lack of compassion but burnout and financial ruin. These are not safe or sustainable jobs. These are also not jobs that can remain unpaid. When every other person involved in a call-out, from emergency services to government staffing, is being paid and every other department is funded for its role, how can it be justified that the experts with the most specialised, niche skill set are the only ones expected to work for free? This is a systemic failure – one that has real-world consequences for animals, for responders and for everyday Victorians. To the committee, with all due respect, if you were not being paid to be here today, would you still show up, and could you still do your job the same way?

We are not here just to report problems, we are here to find solutions. From our submission we call on the Victorian government to take on the following evidence-based training: fund government-backed wildlife emergency response teams, especially in peri-urban areas, with volunteers filling the gaps based on an SES model; support frontline responders financially, enabling them to act without going broke or doing

unsustainable hours; integrate wildlife rescue into emergency services, infrastructure and legislation; reduce default speed limits in wildlife zones – just a 10-kilometre-per-hour reduction, from 80 to 70 k's, adds an extra 9 metres of braking distance, often enough to prevent collision or reduce impact severity; expand virtual fencing and emerging AI detection systems at known hotspots; mandate fauna-sensitive infrastructure like underpasses, fencing and signage in all new road projects; retrofit high-risk roads, including escape ramps and responsive signage; require VicRoads and local councils to perform wildlife impact assessments during all construction and upgrades; recognise wildlife response as a legitimate emergency service, including professionalisation of the sector to include paid positions for qualified responders; and mandate wildlife impact assessments and green corridor planning in urban development. These recommendations are supported by successful case studies from Tasmania and New South Wales, the United States and Canada. The science is clear: the models are proven and are provided in our original submission.

This is not just a question of animal welfare; this is a public safety issue, a mental health issue and a moral issue. The public assumes someone is helping these animals. The truth is we are – not just one organisation, but an entire network of unpaid volunteers who continue to carry the responsibility on behalf of the public, often without the support we need or deserve. But without immediate action we will not be able to keep going. Victoria has an opportunity to lead the nation in wildlife protection and road safety, but only if this committee and this Parliament choose to act. Our work provides the need. The data backs the case. The suffering on our roads demands the response. We are not asking for charity. We are asking for responsibility, for recognition and for a system that respects both human and animal life – because it is 2025, and this state and this country expect more. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that, Nicole. We will kick off with questions, and I will start with Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Thanks very much for your submission and appearing before the committee today, and thank you for your work, which is real work that the state is benefiting from greatly. I just want to start by asking a little bit more about the training program that volunteers with your organisation go through in order to function with your organisation but also the kind of training and background that people who are volunteering with Vets for Compassion normally would have – your average volunteer.

Nicole De HAAN: I will let Elaine respond to the experience. The mentorship program – everyone has a six-month probationary period, and then they have an additional six-month mentorship program, which involves a whole range of things, including scenario-based training. We have two different training programs that they go through before they are actually put out into the field. It is a six-month mentorship program where they are partnered up with one person to get the hands-on experience. It is about a 12-month training program. As far as experience goes, I will hand over to Elaine.

Elaine ONG: Just talking about wildlife, obviously a lot of our rescuers and volunteers started as just rescuers, but they all have a specific interest in wildlife. They have come through different groups. We provide training to other groups too who want that training. They are often sent to do Wildlife Victoria's courses or Wildlife Rescuers Inc. courses in terms of behaviour training. What we provide is the darting training for vets and non-vets, who obviously have their own veterinarians to supply them with the sedative drugs. It is all based on safety. It is not enough to just teach them how to use the dart gun, but it is about safety in public. We do this training over that six-month period, when we mentor them and they go out with an experienced darter. This is the same for everyone who comes into our training program. Does that answer your question?

Katherine COPSEY: Yes, it does. Thank you. That is great. Turning to the interactions that you have with various first responders but also with local councils, we have heard some submitters advocating that councils should have an expanded role in relation to response to wildlife strike. In your experience dealing with local councils, do you feel like they have the resource or the expertise, or how much do they rely on you currently?

Elaine ONG: I think for the last 20 years we have been saying that we are willing to train more people. We have offered that to Parks Victoria and to all the councils. We are willing to train more people, but no-one has taken us up on that. Whitehorse council calls us all the time for all species, so does Hume council. They are under-resourced. They are not able –

Nicole De HAAN: Casey as well.

Elaine ONG: And Casey as well, yes. They are under-resourced. They do not have the people power to release to train as darters. The main problem is that in suburbia those guys, even if they had a gun licence, cannot shoot them. There is no chance we can shoot a large animal in the middle of Kew or Camberwell. So although some of them do have gun licences, they cannot use them, not even the police can. Secondly, to tranquillise an animal, we are talking about restricted drugs, so they do not have vets working for them. All these years, although we have offered to train Parks Vic rangers and council rangers, they cannot do it. We are more than willing to train other people, whether they are from other groups or government bodies, but until that happens, they cannot take us up on that. Hence what we are talking about today, and in the next few weeks for you, is that we are just putting out fires, aren't we? We are putting down most of the animals we see, sadly, and the mental toll on the rescuers all over Victoria is terrible. Nobody could handle putting down every animal that comes in. I am hoping the government would take up these mitigation measures. We are not experts on that; you guys probably are. But until then, we are putting out fires. We are not saying that we want to do this forever, guys. We do not want to. We are hoping that we do less, not more. But yes, we welcome training other government people to do it.

Katherine COPSEY: Turning to some of the solutions that you have recommended, there are some that have come through from other submissions as well as intervening earlier in the planning process. I am interested, if you have got any insight into the escalating numbers of road strike incidents that you are seeing, what you think the main driving factors are that we are seeing more animals, particularly in peri-urban areas. What do you think the biggest drivers of that might be?

Elaine ONG: Oh, absolutely. We see it every day, and every other person you talk to for this inquiry will say the same thing, whether it is in Bendigo, Ballarat or Melbourne. We are trying to fit 7 million people in our city in a couple of years time. We need the infrastructure, we need the North East Link, we need housing. I mean, 20 years ago there were only three of us darting. There was Manfred, Sumi and me, and we might get one dart job a month. We used to laugh at tourists telling us, 'Oh, I want to come to Australia so I can see a kangaroo on the road.' We think they are stupid for saying that, because you never see kangaroos in the city. Guess what, we are seeing kangaroos in the city. There was a kangaroo in North Melbourne outside the Royal Melbourne Hospital a few years ago. So it is truly to do with the peri-urbanisation. Everywhere you go, you know, Werribee, Geelong, Sydenham, Wollert, Bundoora, Epping, down south to Pakenham, Berwick, you should see it for yourself. They are obviously bulldozing habitat, and they are literally land-locking these animals. We see it all the time. They have just got nowhere to go. They have got no shelter, no grass, no water, and then the law states that they have to be shot, or you just bulldoze through them so they go out on the road. That cannot be the solution. How can we push them on the road?

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Happy to go to someone else.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks, Ms Copsey. I will go to Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you. Thank you very much for appearing this afternoon. I am interested just as far as safety. In your response, with wildlife road strike, we saw a volunteer that was in that position of trying to help an animal. What sorts of circumstances are people facing as volunteers going out to assist?

Elaine ONG: You mean about our safety?

Gaelle BROAD: Yes.

Elaine ONG: Well, obviously we keep training our team to be safe. That means there are certain things they are not allowed to do. If they are responding to cases on a busy road, they must call the police. Aside from their safety, we do not want to be followed by a SWAT team coming at us because we have got people carrying dart guns that look like firearms. We do not want to panic the public. And also we need traffic control. The police often do respond, and they have been very, very good, but sometimes they just cannot. So in that case we have to do our best. Sometimes we just have to sit back and wait for police to come because it is too dangerous for us to be trying to slow down traffic. On other roads that are not so busy we do have hazard lights, we have cones, we have high-vis vests, so we do our best to stay safe.

Gaelle BROAD: Is there any requirement to wear a high-vis vest, because I mean, that lady looked to be in dark clothing. Is there any sort of –

Nicole De HAAN: Her vest is reflective, but it is not high-vis.

Elaine ONG: Her vest is reflective, because when we work on the train lines they do not allow us to wear the orange vests because we look like them. So we had to get a new set of black ones with silver reflective things, so it is reflective.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes. Okay. And with volunteers, what is the availability – because it is a high demand, as you said, and you have obviously had a huge increase in the number of incidents. But how are you going with volunteers and what are you hearing from other parts of the state?

Elaine ONG: Well, because we have more vets in our team than other groups, we give advice to anybody who calls us. We do not care whether they are from Bendigo or Ballarat or Grampians or anywhere else. Everyone is overwhelmed and tired and going broke. So it is just not sustainable. We do what we can to educate everybody about how to examine those animals, so we share. We are very willing to share all our knowledge.

Nicole De HAAN: We have put a lot of time and effort and money into this in the last six months. We have had quite a lot of feedback from the volunteers, again particularly in the last six months. We have had a number of them exhibiting signs of compassion fatigue, burnout and a few other things, and they have flagged that with us. We have done a few training sessions on that now and we have got a number coming up. We are trying to do one a quarter on how we manage that. Managing volunteer hours, to answer your question, is incredibly difficult. I have been consulting with the SES. We have got quite a good relationship with them. I have been working with them on how their model works, and also around how on earth you manage volunteer hours when it is a volunteer role versus a paid role, because you cannot – it is difficult, because in a paid role there are laws around, 'Okay, well, you can only work this amount of time' and there is overtime and there are restrictions; there is not that in voluntary. And then it is really difficult to say, 'Okay, well, you've been at your paid job for 12 hours or 8 hours, so you can only do another 4 hours with us.' It does not work like that.

I have been speaking to the SES around how they manage that. They have given us some tips. We are working at the moment on a customised app, so we have been looking for about 18 months now for other devices, other software, other programs. This is something else that we can do to help manage that better, and we have decided to look at building our own – we are about 80 per cent of the way through – which will actually monitor how many hours they have been out on the road. It will actually flag it with them, although it will not stop them. It is a traffic light system in that when they open up their app, it will say green, orange or red. They have actually suggested that to us, although it does not mean you absolutely cannot go out. At some point, we may actually implement that as well: 'Okay, well, you've done 8 hours or 12 hours with us. You can't do any more.' That is something that we have been talking about internally, but they feel that that is something that will help them actually recognise and maybe think twice about accepting jobs. It is a real struggle at the moment, this guilt that they face every day when they get a call to go out, and particularly ones later at night. There does not seem to be a lot of people available to go out late at night, so they get called and they feel the pressure and they respond to that. But if they are opening something up and it is saying, 'Hang on, this is a red, this is flashing', they feel like that will help them, so we are in the process of implementing that.

Just quickly, going back to your question before about keeping them safe, we are also at the moment starting fitness testing. All our volunteers that are working in the field will have annual fitness assessments to make sure that they are physically fit but also fit in general. We are in the process of rolling that out at the moment. We are also looking at all other avenues of the job. There are a lot of other aspects, like climbing. There are situations where they need to go down an aqueduct, they need to go into water. Water assessment is actually part of the fitness test. We are actually looking at getting the guys that are doing the climbing work certified in climbing safety as well, so we are looking at getting equipment for that. There are all different aspects across the board, situations and scenarios that they are coming up against daily. We are trying to implement things along the way. There is just so much that has to be done, but we are actively working on those, and they are actually all in the pipeline for the next couple of months to six months.

Gaelle BROAD: I am just interested too. You mentioned deer, and I think you were talking about some urban areas. Did you say Balwyn?

Nicole De HAAN: Yes. Regularly.

Gaelle BROAD: Wow. Okay.

Elaine ONG: That was three days ago.

Gaelle BROAD: I hear reports of deer starting to spread across the state. Why do you think we are seeing that increase in the number of deer?

Elaine ONG: I think they have also been disturbed by the building, such as the North East Link, which runs from Bundoora to Ringwood. They just travel along the Yarra and end up along the Yarra and into suburbs adjacent to the river.

Gaelle BROAD: Do they breed like kangaroos? What is their pattern of breeding?

Elaine ONG: I am not an expert on that, but I do not think they are that prolific.

Gaelle BROAD: So do you think the population of deer has increased, or you are saying it is just because houses are being built and they are being moved?

Elaine ONG: I do not know about deer. I think you might have to ask DEECA about that. But from what we see with kangaroos and the fact that we see wildlife in the city, it is because they get pushed out by development. There is no reason for them to come into the city by themselves.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes. We are seeing kangaroos in Castlemaine now in the main street, which we have not had before.

Elaine ONG: It is truly to do with urbanisation. I do not think they are breeding more. We are just encroaching on their habitat.

Gaelle BROAD: Do I have time for one more?

The CHAIR: You have time for one more, yes. Go for it.

Gaelle BROAD: I am just interested, in your submission you mentioned AI detection in New South Wales. Are you able to expand on that any more or provide a bit of background?

Nicole De HAAN: I put links in the original submission, I think, so I can provide the studies to you. I printed off everything – probably not that one, though. So yes, I have got some stuff to leave for you. I think that is one of the only ones that I did not actually print off.

Gaelle BROAD: That would be great, if you could send that. Thank you.

Nicole De HAAN: I can send that to you.

Elaine ONG: May I say that you have to treat these wildlife strikes as potentially harmful to the public. Just as an escaped tiger that has escaped the zoo, they could potentially cause a lot of harm to people.

Gaelle BROAD: There was a fatality recently, and they do sort of link it with a wildlife road strike incident.

Elaine ONG: It is only a matter of time, aside from the animal cruelty issue.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Broad. That is a really good spot for me to pick up, because I had a question in relation to that. Something that has been really obvious throughout this inquiry process is that wildlife road strike is not just an animal welfare issue, it is a human safety issue, and each and every day that we leave the crisis unaddressed, we are putting road users at risk as well. I know that Vets for Compassion has been involved with some pretty hectic public safety response cases. Could you tell us a little bit about your experience with that work you mentioned before – for example, working on train lines?

Nicole De HAAN: Regularly.

Elaine ONG: Yes, regularly. Metro obviously controls this. They become the incident controllers in this event – but regularly across everywhere, Epping, Mernda, Brunswick. There was a kangaroo that was on

Flemington Road outside the Royal Melbourne Hospital. We followed the kangaroo up to the Brunswick train station. But regularly there would be kangaroos that enter the tracks because there are plenty of holes in the train tracks, and of course it is not safe for us to get into the tracks, so we have to inform Metro, and Metro will invariably stop the trains so that we can dart them and relocate them elsewhere. So that happens a lot.

Nicole De HAAN: It is almost a daily occurrence. They are scaling, you know, 3- or 4-metre high aqueducts, having to get down. There are a lot in dams that are right out in the middle, and the team have to figure out a way to be able to safely get themselves in but also be able to get them out quickly if something does happen, which has happened before. The list could go on of all the really scary, risky things, the situations they are put in.

The CHAIR: And Metro and V/Line, for example, call you directly in that instance?

Elaine ONG: Yes.

Nicole De HAAN: Yes, and Eastlink – we get calls from Eastlink multiple times a week as well.

Elaine ONG: Yes, yes.

The CHAIR: And yet there is no ongoing funding or support for your work from Eastlink?

Elaine ONG: No. With Eastlink there are many, many instances where the kangaroos end up in the construction site, which is going to go on for 10 years.

Nicole De HAAN: And the tunnel – Mullum Mullum Tunnel. They like to get in the tunnel, so they have had to close down the freeway a number of times.

Elaine ONG: Closing the freeway would cost the government a lot of money.

The CHAIR: Yes. I just wanted to drill a little bit more down into something that Ms Copsey raised before, and that was some evidence we heard earlier today about passing the responsibility for responding to wildlife over to other roles, such as council rangers. It is my view from working with the wildlife community that there is no shortage of experience, passion and expertise, it is just that there is no support in order to do it fully and sufficiently and to keep that retention. Do you believe that, with the right funding and support from the government, you would not only be able to maintain your work but upscale the work and support the people who work with you through that?

Elaine ONG: Yes.

Nicole De HAAN: Absolutely.

Elaine ONG: Currently, if you ask most groups – I have only asked wildlife rescuers – we are only responding to maybe 30 per cent of the cases out there. That includes natives and non-natives. So every group can actually expand their work.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Nicole De HAAN: It is predominantly limited to people's availability and capacity, because there is 8, 12 – 8 to 10 hours a day that each person is not available.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Elaine ONG: So I think paid roles would help in different parts of the city, and even then we would still rely on volunteers to cover the rest.

The CHAIR: And do you do you find that the inability to respond to cases is having a mental impact on your organisation –

Nicole De HAAN: Yes.

The CHAIR: knowing that that suffering is continuing if they do not push themselves to go?

Nicole De HAAN: It is huge.

Elaine ONG: It is quite a trap, because every volunteer will feel guilty that they cannot respond.

Nicole De HAAN: Yes. Like I said, we have had two meetings in the last six weeks, eight weeks solely just around that, and trying to counsel them through how to deal with that is not easy.

The CHAIR: And just talking a little bit more about your experience with darting – Elaine, I have seen you out there with your dart gun and obviously you are one of the few darters in the state who have the ability to respond to the more complex cases that require it. Could you talk us through the financials of having to dart an animal and the cost of doing that work?

Elaine ONG: Yes. The dart gun – the best dart gun costs about $7000 by the time you –

Nicole De HAAN: It is more now. It has gone up.

Elaine ONG: Is it?

Nicole De HAAN: Yes, it has gone up. It is about nine.

Elaine ONG: By the time you equip that with a good-quality scope, built-in range finder and a night torch, all those sorts of things, plus licensing fees, yes, it is quite expensive.

The CHAIR: And how much is the cost of a single dart each time you use it?

Elaine ONG: The dart is about $13 each, which varies, and also the drugs could vary from $20 to $150 for a deer. For deer it is highly expensive.

The CHAIR: And that is relying on you getting it right the first time?

Elaine ONG: Yes. We do not miss often.

The CHAIR: I bet you do not miss.

Elaine ONG: They are actually reimbursed – we have got mutual darters. We encourage them to join. And thanks to Wildlife Vic, they do reimburse some of the costs of drugs and darts and mileage, but it does not cover the cars and all of the others – the extra travel to the carers' places and all that.

Nicole De HAAN: A carer's shelter.

The CHAIR: And if that is not a Wildlife Vic call-out – for example, if you get a call by an agency or department, you do not get reimbursed for that?

Elaine ONG: No. I think we only respond – looking at one of the busiest darter's data for the last six months, 38 per cent of his calls were from Wildlife Vic. The other 60-something per cent was from everybody else – Parks Vic, police, SES, CFA and other groups.

Nicole De HAAN: We reimburse all our volunteers for every out-of-pocket expense, including mileage. We reimburse at the 88 cents per kilometre per person, so the mileage costs alone are pretty high. We cover the cost of their darts, their drugs, purchase their equipment, provide vehicles, we provide all their safety equipment. We cover all the costs of their training, their additional upskilling, all of that, so it adds up.

Elaine ONG: I think the point is that most people are going slightly backwards, because they should be working and they are not.

The CHAIR: Yes. That is probably a good time to go into your yearly running costs, if you are happy to share. What sort of financial impact does this have on your organisation, and do you have any strategies to be able to ensure you will be able to keep doing your work, because I can imagine it is rather stressful?

Nicole De HAAN: Yes. The last financial year was $558,000 in operational costs just for the last 12 months. We have just received a grant from Animals Australia to fund two full-time capacity-building roles, because we

are at a point now where we are in real strife. We cannot just keep begging and asking for money, but we actually cannot respond. We just cannot continue. So we are looking at forward planning of how we can become self-sufficient. So we do have two capacity-building roles – one has started; one we are hiring for at the moment – which we hope will help somewhat. But I currently do not see how it is going to work long term without those roles and more of those roles and being able to keep these guys on the road. I mean, we have just also put on – since the relocation permit, part of the relocation permit is that we have to monitor every patient that is released. We have to monitor them every week for four weeks. So post release our teams would usually check on them once, but checking them once for four weeks every patient, that is a huge task, so we have just hired and recruited a post-release monitoring team. So that is another 35 volunteers who we are now going to have to be covering the cost of mileage for, and they are not only going to the release site, they are checking the release site and the rescue site, so that is double the mileage that the current volunteers are doing. I mean, yes, $550,000 for one year plus another additional 35 volunteers' mileage alone – it is concerning.

Elaine ONG: We also cover all species. It is not just wildlife. There are a plenty of strikes out on the road that are involving farm animals too.

The CHAIR: You were first on scene for the truck crash of the cows in Melbourne, right?

Nicole De HAAN: Yes, 74.

Elaine ONG: That, thankfully, ended well. There were no cows running in the middle of the city, in South Yarra.

The CHAIR: Yes. I just have two more really quick questions. Obviously a strength of your organisation is that you utilise vets, so not just wildlife carers or rescuers but people with veterinary experience as well. Can you tell us a little bit about, I guess, the issues that can arise on the broader workforce by not properly sustaining the wildlife rescue services? Do you think it is pulling vets away from areas of demand, or is there a place for wildlife-specific veterinary training? Because obviously that is not really something that is in the curriculum, is it? You know, what is your experience putting the vets out there on field?

Elaine ONG: The vets who volunteer for us really want to do this because for the ones who work in clinics like emergency hospitals, they are seeing cases coming to their clinics too. In fact there are many clinics that support all the volunteers around. So they really want to do this. They want to do extra training. They want to learn more. And I think by ignoring this, it is totally unfulfilling for those vets.

The CHAIR: Do you think there is a scope for broader training for vets who want to help? Something that comes through to me a lot is that they want to help but are not given wildlife training.

Elaine ONG: Absolutely. We vets learn a lot from the carers too and the rescuers.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Nicole De HAAN: From an operational point of view, the biggest thing that we are coming up against is that they are so busy in everyday practice. Especially post COVID it is a different world in the veterinary industry. The suicide rate is one of the highest among industries in Australia, and the demand on clinics is significantly higher than it ever has been before. So one thing from a recruitment perspective, we are really struggling to get vets. We have actually got six new ones that are being onboarded and going through the onboarding process at the moment, and we will start their mentorship program, which is exciting, but it is really difficult. It has taken us a long time to get them, because they are so overworked in their everyday roles that they do not have the time to be able to volunteer to come and do this, which actually does limit us somewhat with how we can continue doing this. At some point Elaine and Chris will retire, and from a sustainability point of view it has always been our goal as an organisation to create sustainability, so for them to train this current team and that current team is actually training the next gen that are coming on board. But it is really difficult to have vets come on, because there we are working so much every day. But there are great learning opportunities and training opportunities for them; it is just finding the time, unfortunately.

Elaine ONG: When we started this, it was all about making ourselves dispensable. That is how we wanted it, so that is why we said we have shown that we really want to train others to continue to work.

The CHAIR: Yes. Great. Thank you. And then just lastly, we have had a few witnesses of the view that one of the ways that we could assist with preventing wildlife road strike is by managing populations, so through commercial shooting programs and authority-to-control-wildlife permits. And then we have heard from of course the wildlife rescue community – and it is obviously my own view – that this can actually exacerbate the problem. Do you have any experience in dealing with the impact of shooting on mobs in areas that you service?

Elaine ONG: Oh, yes. I saw those shootings during the fires in the last 20 years. Let us talk about shooting. Even if you do not care about the animals, there is really no way you can shoot properly in the dark. I know for a fact that they do not just – sorry, we are talking about commercial shooting, and there is no way they will shoot just the males. There is no way that you can round up the joey and shoot it too. I know because I have sat in the bush for three days in the Grampians, waiting for the joey to come back to the dead mother, but it is just not practical. Shooting as a mob in a city development site is impossible. If you fence them in, they will crash against the fences. Once you start shooting, they will all crash into fences, and it is not a pretty sight. It is a PR disaster.

The CHAIR: And further increases the risk of them then going on to the roads.

Elaine ONG: Yes.

Nicole De HAAN: We also see – and we only did a post about two weeks ago on this, and it is not a one-off – when they have been shot but they –

The CHAIR: Escape.

Nicole De HAAN: Yes. And then they are left to jump around with gunshot wounds and to suffer in the most horrific ways. Some of them will heal, but they will eventually die. It is cruel, and we see it all the time. They are not shot correctly and accurately.

Elaine ONG: Again, even if you do want to shoot them, it is just not possible to do it humanely. There is just no way. The authority-to-control wildlife permit only allows you to either shoot or push them out onto the road. If we can prove that one is not safe to shoot, it is often not safe to shoot. You have just got to allow the developers a way out to say 'Can we apply for a translocation permit somehow?' – done properly.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. That is well and truly my time. I will go to Mr McIntosh.

Tom McINTOSH: Thanks to you both for being here. Elaine, I might put my question to you just to start off with. Just to get an understanding, how many years did you say your organisation has been going?

Nicole De HAAN: Since 2016. Elaine and Chris have been doing it significantly longer than that independently.

Elaine ONG: We were rescuers for a long time with Wildlife Victoria, and we were there just as vets. After the fires in Bright a long time ago, well before Black Saturday, we witnessed animals on fire. They were literally on fire, and we could not catch them, so that is how we got our dart gun permits. We have been doing fire work and then increasingly more suburban work for 20-something years, I suppose.

Tom McINTOSH: I noted down earlier 8376 hours of volunteer work a year. How many volunteers do you have across the organisation?

Nicole De HAAN: We have 110 volunteers in the organisation currently. Field team wise, we only have 17 active field members. We have another six support field roles. We have just recruited another six additional vets, who are obviously going through the onboarding process. Like I said just before, we have just recruited another 35 to do the post-monitoring release teamwork. The active field that are responding to these calls – there are only 17 of them. There are only eight darters out of that 17.

Tom McINTOSH: Has that been a gradual increase in volunteers over time?

Nicole De HAAN: Yes.

Elaine ONG: The volunteers can do it, but they are all restricted by their work time and family time.

Tom McINTOSH: I was interested when you showed the – I think it was over three years – I forget exactly what it was that you had up earlier, but I think it was an increase in road strikes from 455 to 1495 in your presentation. Was that road strikes you were looking up before?

Nicole De HAAN: Yes. What would you like to know?

Tom McINTOSH: I think it was over three years that you had recorded that.

Nicole De HAAN: We started collecting really specific data at the beginning of 2022. That was the start of the 2022–23 financial year – until this year, so that is over three years.

Tom McINTOSH: Is it that you are getting better at capturing what is happening, the increase – have you got more people out getting data – or do you think that increase is purely a –

Nicole De HAAN: It is demand for service.

Elaine ONG: It is definitely increasing.

Nicole De HAAN: The phone is ringing off the hook, which it was not three years ago, so it is definitely demand for services. Somewhat there is an increased number of volunteers, but the amount of volunteers that are active in the field has actually stayed pretty consistent for the last three years.

Tom McINTOSH: Okay. Do you think part of that is better understanding of yourselves as far as the connectivity point of view – reaching out to you? I am just trying to –

Nicole De HAAN: I think it is word of mouth, to be honest. We do not really heavily market. We use social media. We only started using it probably better in the last six months, maybe 12 months. We do not advertise. We direct everybody to Wildlife Vic – to call them first. When I get calls to the VFC phone every day, my first point of call is for them to call Wildlife Victoria and then they will call us. So it is not due to marketing, I think it is just word of mouth. We get quite a lot of calls, I reckon at least – completely guessing – I would say 50 to 60 per cent of the calls I get each week are people that have called so many other numbers and no-one is able to help. They are just at a point where they are so desperate and they are just begging for help. They have called someone, and that person has told them to call that person, or they are putting posts on social media, and we are sort of a last resort.

Elaine ONG: And police are not able to deal with these incidences. They just cannot shoot safely, so they call us all the time too.

Tom McINTOSH: Do you think the drought has had some impact on animal movements?

Nicole De HAAN: Yes, I do, in the Grampians somewhat. I do not know about here in Melbourne.

Tom McINTOSH: Alright. I think I will leave it there. Thanks, Chair. We have got about two minutes. I will let you do your close.

The CHAIR: That is perfect timing to finish up. Thank you so much, Nicole and Elaine, for appearing before us today, and a really big thankyou for the incredible work that you do for our wildlife. If any committee members have follow-up questions, they will submit them to you on notice. But for now, that is all we have got time for, so that concludes the hearing.

Nicole De HAAN: Thank you.

Elaine ONG: Thanks for listening.

Witnesses withdrew.